

United States

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Pilots picket Midwest Express

Members of the Airline Pilots Association picketed Milwaukee's Mitchell International Airport July 2 to protest inferior wages at Midwest Express. Pilots charge they make 19 to 44 percent less than a comparable pilot at other airlines. The average pay in the airline industry for a pilot captain with six years seniority is about \$140,000, while wages at Midwest are \$90,000. Midwest Express pilots unionized in 1997 and have been working without a contract since then.

Workers strike tech industries in New York

Workers for some 40 technology companies in the New York metropolitan area, including Firetector and Firecom, went on strike July 1. Those who walked out include field representatives and shop workers at companies involved in manufacturing, marketing and service of data communication products and systems for fire alarms, life safety, transit, security and communication industries.

Contract talks begin at Boeing

The International Association of Machinists (IAM) offered its initial contract proposal to Boeing Co. June 29 as talks covering 49,300 of the aerospace company's 214,000 workers are set to begin in mid-July.

Although Boeing is in the process of reducing its workforce by another 20,000 by the end of next year, the IAM has said it will not negotiate the company's practice of outsourcing jobs to lower-wage countries such as China in exchange for airplane orders. Outsourcing was the principal issue in the bitter 69-day strike in 1995.

"The issue of outsourcing—the giveaway of work for the sale of aircraft—is an issue that does not belong at the bargaining table but one that belongs in the halls of Congress," declared Dick Schneider, chief negotiator for the IAM. Schneider also complained that Boeing's European rival Airbus Industrie was using large government subsidies to lower its prices and "steal" market share.

The IAM's decision to drop this issue from bargaining comes after two years of behind-the-scenes negotiations aimed at averting another strike. Union officials have

gone on joint labor-management trips to China and Boeing has provided the IAM with information to bid against nonunion subcontractors in the US in order to retain work in-house. The IAM is also considering joining with other big companies in the Northwest to bargain with health-care providers to lower costs. Management is also seeking to establish a "nontraditional" work week, meaning work crews would be on the premises seven-days-a-week, 24 hours a day.

Right after the 1995 strike R. Thomas Buffenbarger was installed as the IAM's new president. "We agreed that the strike should never have happened," said Buffenbarger. "The union and the company had been closed and separate societies. Something had to change."

"It really gets down to are we really willing to work with one another," said Boeing vice president and lead negotiator Jerry Calhoun.

The IAM is expected to poll members for a strike vote in July. The present contract expires September 2.

Steelworkers union and two largest steelmakers reach tentative agreement

The United Steelworkers union (USW) and the nation's two largest steelmakers, US Steel and Bethlehem Steel, reached a tentative agreement June 25. The five-year contract covering 25,000 steelworkers at the two companies provides a \$2 an hour raise in incremental steps over the life of the agreement and increases pension benefits. The proposal was endorsed by the USW bargaining unit by a 13-2 margin.

There are indications that the USW, which is a mere shell of the organization that once had nearly a million members, will continue to accept the destruction of jobs in the steel industry under the new agreement. The tentative agreement between the USW and the largest two steelmakers provides a pattern for the remaining small steel companies in the USW bargaining unit. Meanwhile the USW has joined with the steel makers in a chauvinist campaign to demand tariffs against steel imports from Japan, Latin America and Russia.

Chicago Park workers vote to strike

Over five thousand full and part-time Chicago District Park employees voted at the end of June to authorize strike action. Some 90 percent of the employees represented by the Service Employees International Union, including lifeguards, day camp counselors and maintenance workers, supported taking the action. District Park officials and the union continued negotiations in an effort to block a strike.

Supermarket chain prepares for strike in Colorado

Safeway, the giant supermarket chain in the Denver area, has begun to take applications for strikebreakers in the event of a work stoppage. Negotiations between Safeway and the United Food and Commercial Workers Union broke off at the end of June after the union rejected a proposal from the company. The UFCW could strike the grocery chain sometime during the month of July.

McDonald's workers in British Columbia vote on union decertification

Workers at North America's only unionized McDonald's restaurant in Squamish, British Columbia, voted last Friday on whether to decertify the union brought in by a teen-led organizing drive less than a year ago. The result of that drive led to nearly 90 workers voting to join the Canadian Auto Workers but they are still struggling to win a first contract from the franchise outlet's local owner.

The workers accepted a mediator's decision providing pay raises of between 10 and 30 cents Canadian per hour, but the franchise owner has rejected this proposal. The union has accused McDonald's and the franchise operator of stalling the contract talks to allow enough time to elapse for a decertification vote to be held. The owners deny there is any connection between the contract negotiations and a worker's petition to oust the union.

Attempts to unionize other McDonald's outlets in Canada and the United States in recent years have often ended with the restaurant being closed or the workers victimized without any resistance from the unions. This record is being used to convince workers to give up their fight. The outcome of balloting is not expected for several days.

Alberta nurses accept sell-out contract

Despite overwhelming opposition within the rank and file, Alberta's nurses ratified a new two-year contract June 28. The passage of the contract, which has been hailed as a victory by union leaders, was more a measure of the disgust among nurses who fought a determined campaign against the provincial government's health care cuts, only to be abandoned and betrayed by their union.

The 45 percent turnout in the vote reflects widespread

dissatisfaction among United Nurses of Alberta (UNA) members. The contract was approved by a vote of 82 percent by the remainder who did vote. The deal provides some wage improvements especially for senior RNs who get a 9.7 percent raise over two years, while new employees get 6 percent. The contract does not, however, address the key issue of the workload for nurses that brought them to the brink of defying the province anti-strike laws last month. A walkout was only averted when union leaders accepted the government's contract.

The problem of understaffing was answered with the promise to hire 2,000 new nurses by Health and Wellness Minister Halvar Jonson, an issue not dealt with in the contract. Union president Heather Smith said the union may take legal action to force the Minister to keep his promise but then attempted to paint a rosy picture of the situation, saying, "This is the kind of contract that allows us to live to fight another day. We'll be back in bargaining in 18 months."

Saskatchewan nurses face punitive fines

The Saskatchewan nurses union may have to pay a \$1 million fine for defying anti-strike laws last April. Two weeks ago the union defended itself in court against contempt charges stemming from the illegal 10-day strike.

A court order had instructed the union to order nurses back to work, but it refused to abide by the court injunction. The union and the Saskatchewan Association of Health Organizations resumed talks after the two sides signed a memorandum of understanding that outlined terms for a new collective agreement. The association is now seeking the fine, saying a clear message must be sent that the law cannot be broken.



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